Serendipity

Blame it on stereotypes, blame it on violent video games, blame it on bullying. But survivors of the Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999 were often told that everything happens for a reason. Many resolved to be better people and live their lives to the fullest. Some students wanted to never forget, and others wanted to never remember. That day affected everyone’s lives, including mine.

Tuesday, April 20th started off slowly for me: the drama and excitement from Saturday’s prom was wearing off, and fourth period physics could not have gone by slower. I didn’t care about racing mousetrap cars, let alone constructing them. When the bell finally rang at 11:07, I bolted from the lab, bumping into my friend Danielle.

“Hey, Natalie. You wanna go with Brandon and me to lunch?”

“Where are you going?”

“Not far, just Golden Panda.”

“You know I hate Golden Panda,” I said disgustedly.

“Right. Then Robert’s Deli?”

“Nah, I gotta stay behind and do French homework.”

“Loser. Just copy mine.”

“I’ll never learn how to conjugate être if I don’t do it myself.”

“Fine. Want me to bring you a calzone?”

“Definitely. You’re the best.” I gave Danielle a quick hug before walking down the wide corridor towards the library.

I entered the double doors, passing through the two grey sensors for the nerds who might steal library books. The library was filled with procrastinators frantically trying to finish homework, laid-back students in fifth period study hall chatting with their group, and scattered socially awkward teenagers sitting alone with books in their hands.

I sauntered through the crowds to reach the back nook, where I knew it’d be quieter. Plopping myself down on the grey carpet, I checked my watch. 11:16. I had an ample 45 minutes to finish French.

*BOOM*. An explosion sounded from the other end of the school. The entire library erupted into a frenzy of voices and panicked faces. *What the hell?* I thought.

My confusion was interrupted by the immediately recognizable snap of gunfire. I heard screams and the sound of a panicked stampede breaking out in the cafeteria below me. I didn’t know what to do—the library could’ve be the safest place to be if someone had a gun downstairs. It was difficult to convince myself I’d be better off not escaping. *Just stay. You’ll be fine if you stay put.* The bullets sounded for at least two minutes before police sirens began in the back parking lot. The noise in the library was escalating by the second: the pounding of feet running to anywhere that may be safer than here, the yelling of students to their friends across the room, and the struggle to huddle under tables. I crawled to a corner, desperate for a hiding spot.

Ms. Nielson, the art teacher, ran frantically into the library and crouched under the front counter, grabbing the phone on her way down. The grey spiral cord stretched to reach her hiding spot.

My watch read 11:26. In the ten short minutes that had passed, utter chaos had broken out. The usually quiet library felt weighed down with panic. Smoke flooded into the room through the double doors I had entered not long before.

“Students, down! Under the tables kids, heads under the tables!” Ms. Nielson shouted from her post underneath the desk.

Two girls directly across the library from me began to cry. They huddled together, gripping each other’s hands, murmuring prayers that they’d make it out alive. I longed to be with Danielle. *I should’ve gone with her. I could be getting a calzone instead of being in danger of whatever’s going on here.*

An earsplitting snap reverberated right outside the library door. My hands instinctively shot up to my ears to cover my head.

“On the floor! You guys stay on the floor!” Ms. Nielson was screaming again.

The steady ring of the fire alarm began, the only thing constant in this situation. *This is just great*, I thought. A student near the door of the library coughed forcefully from smoke inhalation. The sirens outside multiplied.

Another shot pierced the air. A few kids gasped. One more shot. Then I heard the library’s double doors fly open, then slam. *Shit. I’m going to die.*

“GET UP!” a male voice shouted. Two more shots rang out. A girl across the room began to fidget in an attempt to stand up, but the boy next to her held her down.

“EVERYBODY GET UP!” a different male voice yelled. The girl looked at him with protesting eyes, pleading him to follow directions in the hopes that it would save them. But he knew better, and kept his hand firmly on her back.

“You’re pathetic!” the first male voice hollered. The two made their way towards the two girls crouching under the table. I recognized the boys as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two seniors who everybody had teased for as long as I could remember. Eric bent over and pointed his gun at the terrified girls.

*I don’t want to see this.* I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing what was inevitable.

*BANG*.

My eyelids flew open. One of the girls had rolled out from under the table.

“Oh God, help me!” she cried.

“Do you believe in God?” Eric mocked.

She paused. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s what my parents taught me. It’s what I believe.”

While he fumbled to reload his gun, she slinked back under the table, covered in blood. The gunmen began parading around the library when it suddenly struck me. *Power*, I thought. *They’re just killing for the power they’ve never had.*

I stayed as still as possible so as not to attract any attention. Abruptly, Dylan stopped and spun around, facing my direction. He rapidly shot three or four times. The bullets left holes all around where I lay. My eyes fluttered shut. *If they think I’m dead, they won’t shoot me again, right?* I thought. Eric let out a menacing laugh and climbed on a bookshelf not far from me, shaking it back and forth.

“All of you are gonna pay.” he spat. “Everyone’s going to die!”

The books toppled down onto the floor, the stories of more people disregarded by the killers. The two quietly conversed for a moment in the middle of the library, then walked back towards the entrance, seemingly satisfied and proud of the dominance they finally were able to execute. The only sounds I could hear were their slow footsteps and the steady ringing of the fire alarm.

The double doors clicked closed. I lifted my eyelids cautiously and glanced around the silent library. Across the room, I saw movement. Immediately I shut my eyes again, terrified to show any evidence of life. *Play dead to stay alive.*

       “They’re gone. Right?” It was the most cautious, miniscule whisper I’d ever heard. I opened my eyes once more. Five feet away from me laid a girl, her bronze hair spread around her and a pained expression that told me she had been shot. I hadn’t noticed her there before; I’d been so focused on my own survival.

       I didn’t know how to answer. For one, it was impossible to know. Secondly, my mouth was paralyzed, as was the rest of my body. We remained in complete silence until I heard a student thump across the room towards us. I flinched, the first movement I’d made since the bullets had flown towards me.

       His focus revolved towards me, his ice-blue eyes seemingly piercing my skin. His pale hands found the door. “Get out. Now.” He plunged into the door, setting off the alarm of the emergency exit, the sound combining with that of the fire alarm. I lifted my head, making eye contact with other kids across the room, others who had just evaded murder. I thought about how we were united, united in life.

Although I knew how urgently I needed to leave, I was still stuck on the ground. I slowly moved my arms one at a time until my palms were on the floor. With one big push, I stood up. Slightly dizzy, I looked over at the girl again. Blood surrounded her left leg, staining the carpet. Her face was scarlet and swollen from both crying and holding her breath. She looked back at me with a bleak smile.

“You’re lucky.” she said, her voice strained with pain.

I cautiously took one step forward. My knees shook, but I knew I had to keep going. The girl looked at me with admiration. As I staggered towards the emergency exit, her words rang in my ears: I was lucky. I reached the door, swinging it open.

I swallowed dryly, my heart still hammering in my chest. After stumbling down four stairs, the door slammed open behind me. I froze in fear—was this the end? I heard a deep grunt. A boy I didn’t recognize appeared beside me, a heap of a girl in his arms. Blood stained the back of her yellow tank top and was spilling onto him. He either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“You okay?” he said, his voice cracking.

I peeled my lips apart to say yes, but I inaudibly mouthed gibberish.

With a look of understanding and a slight nod, he weaved around me and continued to clamber down the steps.

After what felt like a century, I reached the bottom of the stairwell. Leaning slightly on the silver bar, the door to the outside swung open with a click. After taking my time in the dim, enclosed cinderblock staircase, the golden sun stung my eyes. I lifted a hand to my forehead and squinted, observing the front parking lot. Police and SWAT forces littered the campus. Paramedics attended to the wounded that had escaped and brought more and more bleeding, broken students out by the second.

The urgency and danger of the situation struck me once more. Now unsure of Eric and Dylan’s location, I began to panic. I knew I had to get to safety quickly. I found sudden speed in my body and used it to briskly navigate the school. I made my way to the back parking lot, passing all the kids who were running for the beige hills behind Columbine in a desperate attempt to get away. Not a single parking spot was empty; between news trucks from NBC, CBS, and Fox and the SUVs and minivans of parents concerned about the whereabouts of their children, the spaces were all filled.

I reached into my jeans pocket, yanked out my silver car key, and jammed it in my ’97 Toyota Avalon. I pulled the door open, and with a deep breath in, I climbed into the driver’s seat. The gas light glowed orange; my tank neared empty. I pushed the “on” button on the radio out of instinct. The usually smooth voice of the broadcaster on 96.1 had a new, dignified tone.

“Fourteen students and one teacher have already been pronounced dead at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado this morning in the worst school shooting America has ever experienced. This count includes the two gunmen, who later committed suicide in the library following their massacre. After a bomb set off as a diversion, the two killers began shooting at students both escaping the school and those already outside at lunch. At this point, a deputy attempted to shoot down the gunmen with no avail. The Littleton fire and police forces have called in the SWAT Team to help rescue the victims and the school is currently being evacuated. Many of those injured are currently at surrounding hospitals; other escapees are at Leawood Park. While we will provide updates as necessary, we urge parents to congregate at the park for further news.”

From the back parking lot to the nearby Shell was likely only five miles, but it took seemingly forever with my hazy mind. It felt strange to do something I’d done a hundred times before, something so ordinary, despite how my morning had gone.

I pulled up to the first pump, a big 6 staring down at me. I maneuvered around the other cars and headed into the mini-mart.

“Five dollars of unleaded please.” I said, handing the middle-aged cashier my money. My own voice sounded shockingly unfamiliar to me.

“You got it. Hey, did you hear what’s going on at the high school? Such a tragedy.”

My eyes met hers. “Yeah. I’m lucky.”

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Attribution of Research

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* Columbine High School is located in Littleton, Colorado.
* One student stayed alive by pretending to be dead.
* Many students exited the library through an emergency exit after the killers headed towards the science wing.
* When the bombs exploded outside, the cafeteria erupted in panic.

2*. Full 911 Call at Columbine High School*. *YouTube.com*. 24 June 2010. Web. 6 Mar. 2011.

* Patti Nielson hid under the desk in the library.
* A bullet was fired right outside the library door before the two entered.
* She screamed at kids to get under tables.

3. Graber, Janna L. "The Day They Can Never Forget." *Redbook* Mar. 2000: 92-96. Web. 13 Mar. 2011.

* Patti Nielson was an art teacher at the high school.
* Valeen Schnurr and Lauren Townsend huddled under a table, holding hands and praying.
* The force of the shot drove Valeen out from under the table.
* One of the gunmen asked her if she believed in God.
* She replied yes, he asked why, and she said that her parents taught her that, and it’s what she believed.
* He stopped to reload while she climbed back under the table.

4. Kuntz, Tom. “Word For Word/Columbine High School; How Carnage in Our Hallways Scarred Us and Made Us Better People.” *NyTimes.com.* New York Times, 23 May 1999. Web. 14 Feb. 2011.

* People told victims that “everything happens for a reason.”
* Some students want to never remember the trauma, while others find it important to never forget what happened.
* Many victims decided to not tease or judge others and enjoy simple pleasures.

5. *Patti Nielson Talks About 20th April 1999*. Discovery Channel. *YouTube.com*. 9 Feb. 2009. Web. 6 Mar. 2011.

* The killers called kids pathetic before shooting them.
* They walked around the library, looking under tables and shooting.

6. “Terror In Littleton: The Community; Columbine Students Talk Of the Disaster and Life.” *NyTimes.com.* New York Times, 30 Apr. 1999. Web. 14 Feb. 2011.

* Eric and Dylan were often subject to name-calling.
* One student said, “They hated back” as to why the killers did it.
* The two stereotyped themselves, and others stereotyped them.
* Violent video games and music were thought to influence their actions.
* Students’ reactions include being proud of the students and community for sticking together and being united.
* Locations of students during the shooting include classrooms, cafeteria, auditorium, and off-campus for lunch.

7. West, Vanessa. "The Columbine High School Shootings." *The Criminal Mind - Contents*. Web. 16 Feb. 2011. <<http://vanessawest.tripod.com/columbine-4.html>>.

* The school’s prom took place on April 17, days before the shooting.
* Eric laughed about the situation while shooting in the library.
* Eric climbed onto bookshelves, shaking them back and forth.
* He also said “everyone’s going to die.”
* One teacher and fourteen students, including the two gunmen, died.
* Eric and Dylan set off a bomb a few miles away from the school in a diversionary tactic.
* Littleton fire and police forces and SWAT Team members were present at the scene to help victims.
* The school had to be evacuated.
* Hospitals struggled to handle all the injured students.
* Escapees gathered at Leawood Park to reunite with their families and friends.

8. Zewe, Charles. "Bullet-scarred Columbine High School Opens Doors to Media." *CNN.com*. Cable News Network, 15 June 1999. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.

* All the carpeting in the school had to be redone due to blood stains.
* Bullet holes filled walls and ceilings.
* The fire alarm sounded during the attack.